



"when the sun sets, we start to worry..."

AN ACCOUNT OF LIFE IN NORTHERN UGANDA

A United Nations OCHA/IRIN Publication

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## FOREWORD

Since taking up my duties as the United Nations Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator I have pointed out that I will use my office to highlight the suffering of vulnerable people across the world and to ensure a speedy and adequate humanitarian response to their pleas.

In a world that is moving ever closer together, we must not allow any of these voices to go unheard or any humanitarian crisis to be forgotten.

The long yet often overlooked conflict in northern Uganda is one such example. Despite great strides in fighting HIV/AIDS and revitalizing the economy, Uganda has not succeeded in finding a solution to this tragedy.

The conflict in northern Uganda is characterised by a level of cruelty seldom seen elsewhere. It pits not just adults but also children against one another, and excludes vast swathes of the population from participation in any semblance of development. No one knows how many people have died as a result of the conflict, but every day schools, homes, villages and families are destroyed, still more people are abducted, enslaved, beaten, raped, and made to fight for the rebels. Most of these abductees are children.

Look into the eyes of a child who has been repeatedly brutalised, tortured or raped, as I did when I visited northern Uganda, and you will never forget what you find there. This abuse of children is one of the most serious in the world. It calls for urgent and concerted action.

The international community has shown an increasing understanding of, and concern for, the suffering of the people of northern Uganda. Its assistance continues to be instrumental in addressing some of the overwhelming humanitarian needs of those

afflicted by displacement, disease and disability. Yet the traumatic nightmare of the people remains, haunting hundreds of thousands, sowing bitterness and destroying their future. Much more material assistance is required. An even greater requirement is the peaceful solution of the conflict in Northern Uganda. The nature of the conflict, its protracted duration and, above all, the punitive and extremely harsh toll it has imposed on the children, on the entire population, urges the need for a negotiated settlement, which, I believe, is the only possible solution.

The current publication “When the sun sets, we start to worry...” tries to help the world better understand this conflict by capturing the pictures and stories of those most affected by the endless cycle of suffering.

From girls abducted from dormitory beds and forced to become “wives”, to boys made to club other children to death, to parents who have no news of their children taken away so long ago, the stories told by the photos and by the victims themselves are of a population in despair. The world owes them better, for the sake of peace and for the sake of humanity. They cannot and should not be abandoned.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Jan Egeland". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jan" and last name "Egeland" clearly distinguishable.

Jan Egeland  
UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and  
Emergency Relief Coordinator





Elderly man soon after his arrival at the child protection unit (CPU) in Gulu. The rebels had forced him to carry their loot for days with little food and water, then released him

## OVERVIEW

***“This is a funny war. I cannot even describe it. The rebels are killing their own brothers and mothers. We are killing ourselves. We are confused.”***

Nelson Ojok, primary school teacher at Kilak Corner IDP camp in Pader District, northern Uganda.

The war that has raged for 17 years in northern Uganda has left its people battered and bruised, tormented by grief, despair and fear. Few conflicts rival it for sheer brutality. Civilians have been killed and mutilated. Thousands have been abducted, tortured and sexually abused. Many have been forced to commit atrocities or to look on, helpless, as others are beaten, raped or murdered. Abducted children are forced to work as labourers, soldiers or sex slaves.

More than 1.2 million people have been forced to leave their homes. Deprived of their means of livelihood, once proud farmers and their families now depend entirely on the food they receive in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Many people have little or no access to proper medical care. Education has been disrupted. Many children do not sleep at home for fear of being abducted. Instead, they walk kilometres at the end of each day from their villages to the relative safety of towns, where they spend the night in public buildings or on the streets.

### **Collective trauma**

Since 1986, northern Uganda has been racked by insurgencies. The latest and longest of these rebellions, that of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), has devastated Acholi, an area close to Uganda's border with Sudan, and has now spread to the neighbouring subregions of Teso and Lango. No one knows for sure how many people have died, but estimates run into the tens of thousands.

The war between the LRA and the national army, the Uganda People's Defence Forces



(UPDF) has had a telling effect on the inhabitants of northern Uganda. The three districts of the Acholi subregion, Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, have been particularly hard hit. Death and disease rates are high, and food is scarce. About 80 percent of Acholi's people live in "protected villages" and camps for IDPs, which are often overcrowded, and lack adequate water, sanitation and health services. Devoid of any means of livelihood in the camps, a people of farmers and cattle rearers has been reduced to near-total dependence on donated food and other humanitarian aid.

Child abductions have long been a major feature of the conflict, but the number shot up after the UPDF launched an offensive against the LRA in March 2002. The rebels kidnapped more than 10,000 children between June 2002 and October 2003, up from 101 in 2001. This brought the total number abducted by the LRA since the start of the conflict to more than 20,000.

Abductees are made to carry heavy loads over long distances. Those who lag behind or fall ill are beaten or killed. Some are forced to kill, maim, beat or abduct innocent victims, or to look on as such abuses are committed. Sexual violence against girls and women is rampant. They are used as domestic servants or forced into sexual slavery as LRA commanders' 'wives'. They are subject to rape, unwanted pregnancy and the risk of infection, including HIV.

One of the visible signs of the collective trauma to which the people of northern Uganda have been subjected is the phenomenon of "night commuters". These are vulnerable people who, fearing abduction, move from the countryside into slightly more secure towns or camps at the end of each day. Most are children who walk up to 10 km to seek refuge from the threat of abduction and violence. They gather in schools, hospitals, district offices, and NGO compounds - wherever they think they can spend the night in safety. Many have to sleep in the open, where they are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The UN has estimated the number of night commuters in Gulu and Kitgum districts at 25,000.

Few schools operate in the north, and these are mostly in towns, which are relatively safe. LRA attacks led to the closure or destruction of 136 out of 189 primary schools in Gulu District in 1996, according to one aid agency. Local officials reported this year that about half the schools in Kitgum and around 90 percent in Pader had been closed.

### **Conflict rooted in history**

The conflict that has spawned the humanitarian emergency in northern Uganda is rooted in the country's recent history, with its complex mix of uneven social and economic development, violent regional conflict and marginalisation of minorities by governments and elites in power.

After the National Resistance Movement/Army of President Yoweri Museveni took power in 1986, there was a widespread fear in the north, especially among the Acholi people, that it would take revenge for atrocities committed when northerners dominated the army. NRA military actions, during which Acholis were abused, tortured or 'disappeared', partially justified these fears, leading many to join rebel movements. These included the Uganda People's Democratic Army (elements of the Ugandan army who fled to Sudan and regrouped after the NRA took power) and Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement.

Lakwena emerged in late 1986, claiming to be possessed by a spirit that was guiding her for the good of the Acholi people, who felt they were being victimised. Her movement offered Acholi soldiers ritual purification for past misdeeds, along with a moral and religious mission to support their opposition to the NRM. This won her some degree of popular support among the Acholi. Her movement was defeated by the Ugandan army in 1987, but her claim that she had spiritual guidance inspired Joseph Kony, who has also purported to be visited by spirits. He gathered remnants of the Holy Spirit Movement around him and formed the Uganda People's Democratic Christian Army, which became the LRA around 1994.

Observers say Kony's supposed religious mysticism is where the similarity to Lakwena

ends. Rather than enjoying popularity and winning the hearts and minds of the Acholi people, the LRA has targeted the civilian population – in defiance of international law – committing severe human rights abuses in the process.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Kony switched from battlefield confrontations with the Ugandan army to kidnapping civilians, attacking hospitals and ambushing vehicles. His group also started mutilating people: cutting off lips and noses, using padlocks to lock the mouths of those they thought might report them, and cutting off hands and ears.

Beyond its stated aim to overthrow the Ugandan government and its purported commitment to establishing a government based on the biblical Ten Commandments, the LRA appears to have no clear political agenda. For the most part, the rebels choose not to engage the Ugandan military, but target schools, health centres, passing vehicles, IDP camps and refugee settlements.

### **Hope and disappointment**

Towards the end of 1993, talks between the government and the LRA gave rise to hopes for peace. However, the negotiations collapsed in early 1994, leading to a dramatic resurgence of violence in Acholiland. After the talks broke down, any support the LRA may have enjoyed among the Acholi dried up, according to observers of the war in the North. This was when the rebels began the mass abduction of children for use as porters, fighters and sex slaves, the observers say.

In June 1998, representatives of the Acholi people listed a number of reasons why the LRA's war continued after the rebels had stopped receiving popular support: Ugandan support for the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army [a Sudanese rebel group]; Sudanese support for the LRA; the fact that some civilians benefited financially from the war; foreign powers' use of Uganda as a base for fighting the Sudanese government; and lack of trust between the Acholi population and the Ugandan government.

The latter half of the 1990s was marked by ongoing LRA actions in northern Uganda from bases in southern Sudan and, in early 1997, the Ugandan parliament voted, after a lengthy investigation, to continue pursuing a military strategy to end the conflict.

Around this time, too, the Acholi diaspora and the churches in Uganda began to play an increasingly active and vocal role in pushing for a negotiated and peaceful settlement to the rebellion. Groups which have been particularly active in this regard include the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), an inter-faith forum of Muslim and Christian leaders inaugurated in early 1998.

From early 1999, there was a noticeable lull in LRA activity and a change in the political climate, especially after Museveni agreed to let community leaders and peace activists talk with the LRA. In late 1999, the Ugandan authorities announced an amnesty for LRA fighters and, in December of that year, the governments of Uganda and Sudan signed a reconciliation agreement that envisaged a series of steps to build mutual trust and, eventually, normalise diplomatic relations. These developments again raised hopes for peace.

However, within weeks of the agreement, the rebels re-entered Uganda from southern Sudan, and the hopes for an early peace were quickly shattered. LRA attacks on villages and IDP settlements resumed. Roadside ambushes became more common. Abductions, killings and looting resumed with a vengeance.

### **Diplomatic breakthrough, military offensive, more suffering**

In 2001, Uganda and Sudan continued their efforts to improve their ties, exchanging diplomats in August of that year. In December, the US government announced that it was adding the LRA to its “terrorist exclusion list”, a move welcomed by Kampala. Eager to mend relations with the US as it pursued its global war on terror, the Sudanese government said it had cut off all support to the LRA. Fearing that Sudan might take

action against it, the LRA began to relocate its bases, soldiers and abductees to the remote Imatong mountains on the Sudan-Uganda border.

In early 2002, Sudan and Uganda concluded a diplomatic protocol giving the Ugandan army access to southern Sudan to attack LRA rear bases. By March 2002, the UPDF had launched 'Operation Iron Fist', a military campaign aimed at "eliminating the LRA threat and freeing abductees".

The operation, which saw the deployment of as many as 10,000 Ugandan troops, had an unintended effect. It led the rebels to return in force to northern Uganda in June 2002 – reportedly with new equipment, uniforms and training. From then on, the LRA, which split into smaller operational units, stepped up its attacks, abducting thousands of children and targeting religious leaders and other civilians. The group also attacked convoys delivering relief supplies to northern Uganda or transiting to affected populations in southern Sudan.

In October 2002, the Ugandan government gave civilians 48 hours' notice to return to IDP camps or 'protected villages', while aid agencies warned that the continuing conflict was destroying the tentative gains of the recent past.

Following sustained efforts and contacts by the ARLPI, the government appointed a peace team in late 2002. However, ARLPI noted that the LRA's attitude changed between July, when there was a military stalemate, and September 2002, as the rebels acquired new military equipment and appeared unwilling to negotiate seriously.

In March 2003, Kony announced a unilateral ceasefire. Museveni initially rejected it, then responded with a limited ceasefire in areas where the rebels were to hold talks with the presidential peace team. However, hopes for peace were dashed in April when the LRA broke the ceasefire arrangements and killed an emissary of the presidential peace team, causing the government to resume open warfare against the rebels. The peace team was

disbanded in May and attempts at establishing a negotiated peace appear seriously constrained as the military option is vigorously pursued.

In June, the conflict spread beyond Acholiland, with the LRA attacking parts of eastern, central and northwestern Uganda. In Teso subregion, attacks on the districts of Katakwi, Kumi, Kabermaido and Soroti have displaced 306,000 civilians.

### **International attention needed**

The unprecedented violence visited on civilians in northern Uganda since 2002 has given rise to the country's worst humanitarian crisis in 17 years, and sparked calls for a higher level of international attention.

Francis Deng, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on IDPs, who visited Uganda in August 2003, said he was struck by "the level of devastation due to the conflict and the precarious situation the internally displaced are facing". Pointing to the complex and intertwined causes of the conflict, Deng noted the need for a regional perspective and possibly third-party mediation to address the problems and achieve lasting peace.

A broad range of Acholi civil and religious leaders have consistently called for dialogue as a means of arriving at a durable solution to the conflict. Another requirement, they say, is a willingness to facilitate and engage in peace talks. The international community has been showing signs of seeking engagement. However, there is little to indicate that both parties are interested in negotiations.

Most observers believe that, given the nature of the conflict, its protracted nature and the scant success of military campaigns, a negotiated settlement is the only possible solution.

Many people in northern Uganda also feel this way. "With fighting, this war will take another 18 years," said one IDP. "The only thing is to sit down and negotiate."



## SCARRED FOR LIFE

***“They take an axe and split your head with it.  
They don’t waste any bullets on you.”***

15-year-old former abductee.

The rebels’ arrival in a village or camp marks the start of a series of traumatic experiences for its inhabitants. Parents are beaten, humiliated and shot, speared or bludgeoned to death in front of their offspring. Children, especially those between the ages of eight and 16, are rounded up; some adults, too. Then, loaded on their backs with loot taken from their own families and communities, they are force-marched across northern Uganda and into southern Sudan. Former abductees all tell of journeys lasting days, weeks or even months. Along the way, they witness more abductions, whose victims are added to the unhappy band of involuntary travellers. The abuses continue, too. Some pay the ultimate price for lagging behind or faltering under their burdens: they are murdered and their corpses left to rot where they fell or thrown into the surrounding bushes.

The captives and their captors finally arrive in the rebel camps, where the former undergo a strict regime of forced labour, deprivation and punishment. Girls are raped or forced to become the “wives” of rebel commanders. Even those not yet in their teens are not spared. Any unsuccessful attempts to escape are brutally punished. Some succeed, but many never reach home.

More than 20,000 children have been abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda since 1990. The kidnappings subsided in 2001, when hopes were high that the conflict was slowly dying out, but after the Ugandan armed forces launched a military offensive in early 2002, the abductions escalated, spreading – along with the conflict – to previously unaffected areas.



Those who manage to escape the LRA are first taken to child protection units (CPUs) run by the military, where they are questioned before being transferred to rehabilitation centres. In Gulu, for example, children are then taken to a centre run by the Gulu Support the Children Organisation, while adults are transferred to a rehabilitation centre run by World Vision, an international Christian relief and development NGO. After that, they are taken to camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) or to their homes.

According to human rights groups, the former abductees are usually scarred for life, constantly reliving their maltreatment, living permanently with the knowledge that they had been forced to beat, maim or kill others, even their own parents and relatives, so as not to be beaten, maimed or killed themselves. Some of the girls face the additional burden of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. As a result of the unhygienic conditions in the bush, many children come back with severe skin infections. They are also restless at night, can hardly sleep, and wake up very early.

Many people have to live with visible reminders of their ordeals. These include people who lost limbs as a result of torture or landmines, whose use by the LRA has increased since the intensification of fighting between government and rebel forces early last year, according to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Organisations such as AVSI, an Italian NGO, have been providing some of the amputees with therapy and prostheses. However, the list of those yet to be fitted with the artificial limbs they need to live something resembling normal lives is said to be long.

The accounts and photographs which follow depict the suffering of a handful of the multitude whose bodies and minds bear the marks of northern Uganda's 17-year nightmare.

***O.R. (14) was abducted from his home in Kitgum in February 2003. He spent four months in captivity before escaping in June. Here he recounts some of his experiences.***

On the way to Sudan, they forced us to kill many people. One morning, a young boy was brought to us. We were told he had tried to escape. His body was swollen and had cuts from many beatings. They killed him. We were told to chop the body into smaller pieces. Boys were given the heart and liver to eat. Girls were told to cook and eat the rest of the body parts. We did as we were told.

A few days later, a commander called me and said he had a special task for me to carry out. He was carrying a newborn baby. He placed the baby in a large wooden mortar, the one we were using for pounding grain. He gave me a heavy wooden pestle and ordered me to start pounding. I was afraid to do it, but I did as I was told. I knew I would be killed if I didn't. All the boys in the group had been forced to do something similar. I knew the baby's mother. She was one of the captives. She screamed when she saw what I was doing. The commanders beat her up so much, and told her to shut up. But they did not kill her. They told me to continue pounding until they were satisfied the baby was dead.

After some weeks, they started to trust me a little, because I always obeyed their orders. They were no longer restricting my movements very much. They gave me a gun and taught me how to use it. But we were still being watched. I decided one day to escape. I slipped into the bush and walked for many hours, avoiding open places. I didn't know in which direction I was going, but I kept on walking. When it became too dark, I crept into a thick bush and slept. I found a UPDF [Uganda People's Defence Forces] military detachment in Kitgum the following day. I reported there. I was told I was in Kitgum District. A few days later, I was brought to this centre [a rehabilitation centre for abducted children run by World Vision in Kitgum]. They have been very good to me.

But I am constantly disturbed by what I did in the bush. I dream about it all the time. Sometimes I hear voices saying things to me. "There is work waiting for you in the bush," the voices keep telling me. "Pound faster... faster...harder," other voices keep saying. In the night I dream of the same things. I fear to go to sleep because of nightmares. I want these dreams to stop tormenting me.

***David (17), abducted on 21 June 1996 just outside Acholibur IDP camp in Kitgum District, is haunted by the memories of the abuses he witnessed during captivity.***

What I cannot forget is how they murdered my uncle. There was no food, and he had become very thin. They made him carry a very heavy load. He could not walk any more. He was very weak. So they killed him. They struck him on the back of his head with a hoe and left him there.

I managed to escape in August this year when we went to raid an IDP camp in Pader. We went to attack the camp at night. I threw away my gun and hid in the bush. I spent the night there. In the morning, I went to report to the soldiers who were guarding the camp. They brought me here. I can't remember where my parents are. I was abducted a long time ago. I can only hope that the people at this centre will be able to trace them. I am trying to forget everything. I hope I will be able to go back to school. I know my future is nothing without education.

***Michael (25), a former abductee, had been in hospital for four weeks. He was beaten by his captors because he could no longer carry their loot.***

I was too exhausted. We [the abductees] had been walking in the bush for weeks, carrying heavy loads, with hardly any food or water. I couldn't carry their [the rebels'] things any more, because I was too exhausted, so they beat me on the back of my head with gun butts. They said they didn't want to waste any bullets on me. Then they left me. They



Denis was found by some women three days after escaping from the rebels, and taken to the CPU in Gulu. He was weak from malnutrition, dehydration and beatings received during captivity





This injured LRA fighter was captured in battle by the UPDF and taken to Kitgum Hospital

thought I was dead. UPDF soldiers found me a week later. Termites had started eating me alive. They had begun building an ant hill on my body.

***Alex (15) - beaten and left for dead for being tired.***

I have been here [St Joseph's Mission Hospital, Kitgum] for two weeks now. I was brought here by UPDF soldiers who found me in the bush. LRA rebels had hit me on the head with a hoe and split my skull. Then they left me to die. They had beaten me because I was too exhausted to walk any longer. For nearly a month, I had been walking barefoot through the bush with the rebels, carrying a heavy bag of maize flour on my head as they moved around northern Uganda abducting more children. They had also beaten me badly for trying to escape. They had caught up with me and given me 100 strokes of the cane on my back and buttocks.

***Charles (25) amputee undergoing treatment at the AVSI rehabilitation centre, Gulu Hospital.***

I worked as a cook at a primary school. I lived in the school compound. Some UPDF soldiers guarded the school. One afternoon, I went back home from work and sat outside my house. Some soldiers came and surrounded me. They said I was a rebel and demanded that I show them the gun I was hiding. I told them I was a civilian and didn't have a gun. But they did not believe me. They insisted that I was a rebel. They tied my hands tightly behind me with a rubber strap and began beating me till I was unconscious. They only left me when they thought I was dead. I woke up in hospital some days later. The doctors told me they had been forced to amputate my arms to save my life. I have been trying to follow up the matter with the authorities through a human rights organisation, which sent a letter to the UPDF Fourth Division. There have been threats to prevent me from pressing the case. I still see all of the soldiers who attacked me. Nothing has been done to them.

Charles lost his arms  
after a severe beating  
by soldiers





This is a new life for me. I now have to depend on people to help me with everything. I cannot even dress or eat on my own. I am tired of this. The school only helped me meet my medical costs, but now I have no job. I cannot go back to my old job with both hands amputated. I have two children to feed. My wife left me when I returned home without my hands.

***Francis, physiotherapist at the AVSI rehabilitation centre.***

When Charles was brought here, the discoloration and gangrene process had started on both arms. After amputation, he was put on strong antibiotics until he recovered. He is not completely out of danger. AVSI is still monitoring the healing process, and will decide on the rehabilitation measures which will benefit him.

We receive many cases of people beaten by UPDF soldiers and their hands tied behind their backs, causing severe nerve injuries. We refer such cases to the Uganda Human Rights Commission, but there has been no response up to now.

We receive many other traumatic cases committed by both soldiers and rebels. When the army bombs rebels, civilians get caught up in it. Recently an eight-year-old child was brought in with a leg destroyed by a mortar bomb from a UPDF tank. I didn't know she would survive. But she adapted very well. We hope to fit her with an artificial leg soon.

***Denis (15) owes his life to the women who found him.***

Denis was abducted on 8 August 2003 from his home just outside Gulu. He had managed to escape from the rebels, but collapsed in the bush after walking for three days. Some women found him and put him in a minibus, which took him to the CPU in Gulu town.

Denis said he had been severely beaten as part of his initiation into the rebel group. "We were made to walk. We slept late at night and woke up very early. We did not reach Sudan.

The sexual abuse  
and violence to which  
girls are subjected  
while in captivity  
leaves lasting  
psychological  
as well as physical  
scars



We were just moving within [northern] Uganda. We went up to Pader. On the way, the rebels abducted more children,” he said.

He was very weak from malnutrition and dehydration. His back was still aching from the beatings and he had acute stomach cramps since he had eaten nothing in days. He was unable to walk without assistance. He could speak only with extreme difficulty.

Many returning abductees arrived at the centre in a similar condition, according to the head of the CPU in Gulu. They are the lucky ones. “Normally some abductees, when they reach this condition, they are abandoned or killed,” he said. “They take an axe and split your head with it. They don't waste their bullets on you. They only use their guns when fighting the army.”

***Santo (17) was on his way to the food-for-work project where he worked when he stepped on a landmine. That was in September 2000.***

He had been using that route every day and was unaware that mines had been planted there. “I felt as if I had stepped into a hole, and the next thing I realised was that I was on the ground. My leg came off immediately. I fell unconscious. For a month, I did not realise where I was,” he recalled.

Santo had been in and out of hospital for three years and was still being treated for his injuries. He was first treated at the World Vision rehabilitation centre in Kitgum, then taken to the AVSI orthopaedic workshop in Gulu to be fitted with a prosthetic leg.

Santo is an orphan. Rebels killed his parents when they attacked their IDP camp in Pabbo, Gulu. He now lives alone there with his 10-year-old brother. They only had each other to count on, he said: “If you’re not able to work, it becomes a big problem. Relatives do not support us. We are not getting help from anyone. Now I can walk, I can get what I need.”



Michael had been beaten and left for dead by rebels. By the time he was found, termites had begun eating him and building a nest on his body





The rebels had split Alex's head with a hoe because he was too weak to carry their loot

AVSI had agreed to finance his schooling, but Santo did not think he had much of a future, given his disability and because he felt unsafe: the LRA had attacked the camp 17 times in 2003 alone. “I believe in education,” he said. “But this is also a difficult question, because this sponsorship [AVSI’s] will depend on the security situation.”

***Sarafina (38) from Kalongo IDP camp in Pader District stepped on a landmine in 1997. She has five children, including one who was abducted six years ago and has never returned.***

I was coming back home from digging in the field in the afternoon. I was carrying my baby on my back and a basket of millet and cassava on my head. It had rained hard, so I could not notice anything. It was very muddy. I stopped to tie the baby properly on my back, then I realised I had stepped on something. When I removed my foot, it was blown off. I fell unconscious. I woke up in Kitgum Hospital on the next day. They told me my baby had died.

My leg was amputated above the knee. I spent many months in hospital, then I returned to the camp in Kalongo where my family lives. It’s only in September [2003] that I was brought to AVSI [orthopaedic workshop] for an artificial leg. AVSI identified me during an assessment which was announced on radio. When they accepted me, I looked for the money and then came to Gulu to be fitted with the leg. Many people can’t travel to Gulu for this kind of treatment, because the roads are not safe or because they do not get to hear about it.

Life is very hard, because I can’t do all my housework as I used to. My husband has another wife. I left the children with her when I was coming here for treatment. I depend on WFP food and my children for support. When I ask people to help, they tell me that they didn’t send me to step on a landmine. The language people use on me is not good. People tell me bitter things just because I can’t work. Sometimes I want to kill myself.

My husband and his other wife treat me very harshly. They say I’m a burden to the family,



Sarafina was fitted with a prosthesis six years after her leg was blown off by a landmine



because I eat but don't work. When he is drunk, my husband becomes very cruel. He abuses me and accuses me of not being a good example to the children. "What kind of children can you have if you cannot even move?" he asks me.

I don't see anything changing in the camp. The situation is so difficult. Sometimes I feel very bitter and lonely. I hope that with this new leg I'll be able to move around more. I also think it will help me earn a living, even if I will not be able to compete with everyone.

**Cecilia (20) was abducted from a secondary school in Pader when she was 15 and spent five years in captivity. She spoke to IRIN at the CPA rehabilitation centre, Kitgum.**

I was given to John Okech, one of [LRA leader Joseph] Kony's senior commanders. I was his fourth wife. He soon brought in four other young girls. They were to become his wives when they were slightly older. In the meantime, they were told to baby-sit for his other wives. When you're given a commander as your husband, you're expected to produce food. You're also given a gun and expected to fight. I was often picked to go out on patrols.

I became pregnant in early 2002, when Kony predicted an attack from the UPDF on our bases in Sudan. By June, our whole group sneaked back into Uganda and hid in the Imatong mountains. This was the most difficult time for captives. My husband was part of the attack on Anaka [a village in Gulu District]. He was shot in the chest by the UPDF. He died a few days later. I gave birth to a baby boy, but he died after a month.

I was released after my husband died. I only returned from the bush a few days ago. I'm still haunted by frightful dreams. I dream often that I'm still in the bush. I hear children crying. I dream that we are being attacked, or fighting, walking for days in the hot desert without food or water. I'm happy to be back, but I have no hope of returning to school. I heard that my entire family was displaced. They are scattered in camps in the district.



Whether or not Santo will be able to go back to school will depend on the security situation, he says



## LIFE AT POINT ZERO

***“The people in the camps are very poor. I mean, the life is horrible. The people here are not living, they are existing. They are next to dead.”***

Charles Uma, chairman of the Gulu Disaster Preparedness Committee.

Over 1.2 million people in northern Uganda live in protected villages and camps. Some went there voluntarily to escape LRA attacks, others at the instructions of the authorities.

In Acholi, the area that has borne the brunt of the rebellion in the north over the past 17 years, the camps are home to between 70 and 80 percent of the population. The number of people in each camp varies greatly. As at September 2003, Pabbo, the largest of the 33 camps in Gulu District, had about 50,000 residents, while Olwal and Olwiyo camps held approximately 25,000 and 2,050 respectively.

As the insecurity spreads, more and more camps are built. Labongo-Layamo, just outside the town of Kitgum, was set up in August 2003. It already accommodates over 12,000 people, mainly from the Labongo area in Cwa County, whose residents had long resisted calls by the government for them to relocate.

Life in the camps is one of abject poverty. Food is short, and many infants suffer from malnutrition. Water is scarce since camps often do not have enough boreholes. There is little access to health care. In some camps there are schools, but not enough teachers. Moreover, school life is constantly disrupted by the insecurity.

IDPs complain that life in the camps has had a disastrous effect on their society. Signs of social breakdown include high levels of promiscuity, substance abuse, unprotected sex and increased numbers of child mothers, they say. As people stay longer and longer in the camps, what is left of their dignity is gradually eroded. Disrespected by the traumatised

youth, forced to look on, powerless, as their society is turned inside out by violence and fear, some of the older adults become mentally ill, according to camp leaders.

While the authorities say the residents of the north have been relocated for their own protection, the camps themselves have become LRA targets. District officials in Gulu said that between April and July 2003, rebels burned four camps in the district alone. Pabbo was attacked 17 times between January and July of this year.

The rebels tend to view the inhabitants of the camps as enemies, as government supporters and, during raids, they sometimes leave written threats, ordering the IDPs to leave the camps or die. Rebels also attack convoys bringing supplies to the camps. As a result, relief organisations generally do not travel to the north without military escorts, which limits the extent to which the camps can be supplied.

The sense of insecurity among the residents of the north has also been heightened by the fact that the rebels have managed to raid areas on the outskirts of major towns.

The accounts and photographs in this section focus primarily on the situation in the IDP camps. The accounts also give an idea of the effect camp life has on the inhabitants of what used to be the granary of Uganda.





***James, camp leader in Kitgum District.***

We were forced to leave our village, because the insecurity had become worse. Our problems started when a girl from our village who had been abducted five years ago escaped from captivity. She was the wife of Vincent Otti [former LRA second-in-command]. Otti sent a message to the village demanding that his “wife” be returned to him. When the elders ignored him, Otti threatened to burn the whole village and kill everybody. We felt threatened, because he is very notorious. He massacred a lot of people in his own village in the Atiak [Kitgum]. So we began to move to this camp. The girl was handed over to the government for protection.

We chose this place because it is near a military detachment. There are some soldiers who come here at night. But they are too few. We have asked the commander to increase the security, but nothing has changed. They [the rebels] have not attacked this camp yet, but they are talking about it. We heard this from abductees who returned from captivity. We don't feel safe. At night, many people walk to Kitgum town to sleep in the mission hospital and other public places. People have waited for a solution for long and in vain. They have decided to take this life as if it is normal.

We have received very little help. Some people sneak back to their homes to get food, but that is too risky. Some have been abducted. Even what you manage to get is very little, because we are always on the run. Many people in the camp go without a meal. As the dry season approaches, there is fear that nothing will be left to eat.

All these children have been out of school since January. All schools were closed due to rebel activities. I don't know what will happen to them. They should be promoted to the next class next year, but they have not covered this year's syllabus. All the 15 schools in Labongo sub-county have been displaced.

There is still no water supply in the camp. There is only one borehole shared by the entire camp population. The borehole is very congested. We request any NGO if they can help us with a clinic. It could help our children. There is a lot of malaria and coughing. There is also a lot of malnutrition due to poor diet. There are very many people with HIV/AIDS-related illnesses. We need also household items such as utensils, blankets and jerry cans. The rebel activities in the villages were so severe that even the household things were taken.

***Elijah (70), resident of an IDP camp in Gulu.***

I was born in Awac [about 20 km northeast of Gulu town] in 1933. I had to leave my land in 1989. I've never gone back. Instead, I've been forced to move from place to place. This camp is now my home. I know I will die here.

I had 14 children. Some are dead. Most of them died in camps. They were killed by rebels. We didn't even bury them; we left them where they had been killed. The situation was really bad. Only four of them are left. This war has affected us in many ways. I've lost my children, so I don't get the help I had before. I am weak and I can't work for myself any more.

At night, my eight grandchildren sleep in the bush with no blankets. I don't know where they sleep, and they always choose a different spot. Not even your mother is supposed to know your hiding place. Rebels always force parents to show them where the children are hiding.

Life in the camp is very bad. I am seeing a lot of new things that I never saw before. I prefer to die than to see any more of this life. These children live like wild animals. They have to be alert all the time. Their morals are changing. We don't see the respect we had with young people any more. During the day like this, we are relaxed. But when the sun sets, we start to worry. We don't know what can happen.



We hardly have anything to eat. Before this war, Acholi people were not used to depending on relief food. We did a lot of things on our own. Now we can't do the same things we did to survive. Even the food WFP shares out will go to the rebels if you don't hide some of it. They always tell us that it is because of them that we receive humanitarian food. So they have to take the food away, because it does not belong to us. When they don't find food, they get very angry.

We hear gunshots all night. We are always on our toes. Anytime, anything can happen, and we might be forced to move again.

***Terrence, a nutritionist in charge of the therapeutic feeding centre for severely malnourished children at St Joseph's Hospital, Kitgum.***

The number of children we receive with severe malnutrition is so high we are overwhelmed. The hospital's accommodation is overstretched. St Joseph's Hospital is the only referral centre for both Kitgum and Pader districts. There are so many severely malnourished children that the hospital is unable to run a supplementary feeding programme. We currently accommodate 160 children. *[Pointing]* All these grass-thatched and tent structures have been erected in the compound because the centre has no additional accommodation. Some of the patients sleep on the verandas because there is no space.

Most of the severe malnutrition cases come from the displaced people's camps. The biggest problem is in the new camps. They have not started taking food there. Due to lack of transport and insecurity, most of the cases are brought here too late, and the children die immediately. We are trying our best to help those who make it. In July this year, we had a 43-percent mortality rate. This has now been reduced to 14 percent.

We have also run short of nutritional milk. This milk [F75] is in Kampala [the Ugandan capital], but the problem is transportation. The roads are not safe. Due to the high



Severely malnourished child being weighed at a therapeutic centre in St Joseph's Mission Hospital, Kitgum. Most of the malnourished children treated there come from IDP camps

insecurity, the nutrition formula needs to come in a security convoy. The hospital can't hire vehicles from Kampala, they are too expensive, because it is a risk they are taking. We only depend on WFP and UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund] donations. Other donors are afraid to come in because of ambushes on the road.

Mothers here also have their children in quick succession. For the last 18 years, there has been no programme to sensitise the population on family planning, so the people stick to their traditions. They have nothing to give the children. Their goats and chickens have been finished by rebels.

The authorities tell you there is no problem here, but the people on the ground are suffering very badly. There is nothing left in northern Uganda. That is why they [the rebels] went to Soroti [eastern Uganda], where they still have food, cattle and goats in the villages.

***Risper: "We don't sleep in our huts."***

Risper's husband died in July 2003 of an AIDS-related illness, leaving her with three children. The youngest is two years old and seriously ill. She could not find anyone to help her build the hut. "Everybody wants money," she said. For a man, building the hut would normally be a one-day job. She had been at it for days. "I am not strong enough to finish the work quickly," she said. "I also have other responsibilities." After working on the house, she had to cook the children their only meal of the day. The only ingredients she had were a cup of sorghum flour and some green vegetables. "We will eat and then find a place to sleep. We don't sleep in our huts," she said.



Risper in her unfinished hut in Labongo-Layamo IDP camp, Kitgum



Malnourished child about to be breast-fed at the St Joseph's Mission Hospital therapeutic feeding centre, Kitgum



Child undergoing treatment at the St. Joseph's Mission Hospital. Not all children afflicted by malnutrition or illnesses in northern Uganda reach medical centres on time







Young girls such as these former abductees at the GUSCO rehabilitation centre in Gulu are made to work for the “wives” of rebel commanders until they, in turn, are forced to become “wives”









Many children in northern Uganda, such as this group at an accommodation centre in the bus park in Gulu, are forced to spend each night away from home

## WAITING FOR THE LIGHT

***"I don't think of the future.  
I don't think I'll go to secondary school.  
There is no one to help."***

12-year-old night commuter

When the sun goes down in northern Uganda, thousands of people leave their homes in villages, outlying suburbs and IDP camps, bound for major towns such as Gulu and Kitgum. Some walk as many as 10 km. Most are children aged between eight and 16 years – those most likely to be kidnapped by rebels. However, many adults also seek the relative safety of the big urban centres each night. They and the children are known as night commuters.

In Kitgum, one of the main destinations of the night commuters is the St Joseph's Mission Hospital, whose compound accommodates more than 10,000 of them each night. Gulu receives an estimated 14,000 child commuters every evening. Around 1,200 of them go to the Noah's Ark accommodation centre for night commuters, which was set up in February 2003.

Another 1,000 find lodging each night at the town's main bus park, where an accommodation centre supported by the African Medical Research Foundation has been established. The centre has two dormitories: one each for boys and girls. However, they are too small to hold all the children, so some have to sleep outside on the dusty ground.

Early in the evening, social workers and district officials look in on the children to make sure nothing is amiss. The lights are left on for a while for those who need to do their homework. In the morning, the children wake up, wash their faces and leave for school without breakfast.



A social worker at the centre said the children always complained of cold, hunger and illnesses, mainly malaria, coughs and skin infections. The Gulu bus park and other shelters do not have the capacity to accommodate all the children commuting into Gulu, so residents offer their verandahs for the children to sleep on. However, when it rains they have nowhere to go and some of them end up on the street.

In both Kitgum and Gulu, some people begin as night commuters and end up staying on in town. According to sources at the St Joseph's Mission Hospital, 450 former commuters no longer return to their homes each morning. Instead, they camp under a huge mango tree outside the mission gates. Early in the morning, men and women go to look for work as casual labourers around Kitgum town. They return in the mid-afternoon, prepare their only meal of the day, and then retire inside the mission for the night.

The group has been there since May 2003, when their camp was destroyed. Shortly before that, the rebels had ordered them to return to their villages. When they insisted on staying, the LRA took punitive action. "The rebels came, burned our camp and killed many people," the leader of the group said. "We don't want to hear anything about going back to the camp. We have been displaced too many times. We have nothing. We are traumatised. We have lost faith in the ability of the government to protect us."

In Gulu, some of the children refuse to go back to their communities because life is too hard and dangerous there. They stay in town to clean buses or help sell food in the market. There have been frequent reports of children being harassed by drunks and thieves, who beat them up and take their blankets away. The police have been patrolling the town regularly to prevent this.



There is not enough accommodation for child commuters at the St. Joseph's Mission Hospital so some sleep outdoors each night

***Geoffrey, a social worker employed by the St Joseph's Mission Hospital to protect night commuters who sleep in the mission compound.***

"The compound accommodates anyone who goes there seeking a safe haven for the night, but the tents are reserved for children, the sick and the elderly. The rest sleep on verandas and in any other spaces available in the compound.

The biggest problem we have is that when it is about to rain, like now, the seven tents are not enough to shelter everybody, so people just get wet because they have nowhere to go. We also have a severe shortage of blankets. Many people do not have anything to cover themselves. Most of their household items have been looted by rebels.

We have to make sure that rebels do not infiltrate the compound. A few days ago, we caught four rebels with guns tucked inside their blankets. We know each and every face that enters this compound. If you don't watch out, then the LRA can easily infiltrate and abduct people from here. You can say it is only God who is protecting us here. The UPDF are here, but we don't see them and we have no communication with them. If the rebels come, we have to run and look for them.

Half the inhabitants of this area come to this centre. Some people also go to public houses, schools, market places, and government buildings. The whole district is displaced. Even the hospital staff are displaced. They sleep in a separate tent with their families.

If commuters fall ill, the hospital only provides drugs for the night. During the day, you have to go to the outpatients' department, where you have to pay money. But these people don't have any money. There are many children who don't go back home. They only roam around and return here in the evening. At night, they cry and ask for food. Some people have slept here for three years. They just go home to cook and come to



Young children sleeping on the ground at the bus park in Gulu



sleep in the evening. If you have nothing to cook, then you just stay here. Even as social workers, life is not easy. Last week, one of our colleagues was bitten by a snake. We took him to the hospital.

***Consy Abwol, a local councillor from Kitgum District, sleeps each night at the St Joseph's Mission compound.***

We are just trying to cope with the situation as best we can. They [the LRA] are killing day and night. They only fear this place a bit because it is a mission. Our children have a lot of difficulties with schooling. They can't learn well, they are traumatised, they can't sleep well, but they force themselves to study. Women are afraid to sleep in their homes, not only because of rebels but also because they fear they might be raped by army officers. They don't care if you are young or old. Rape is very common in northern Uganda. If you report a rape, they just transfer the soldier.

***Prossy (14) lives with her grandmother in Paicho, some 10 km outside Gulu town.***

My father was killed by the rebels in 1996. My mother died in 1998 after a long illness. I walk every evening to the Noah's Ark centre in Gulu town. I go to school each morning with nothing to eat. During the fruit season, you can get something to eat during the day, but now there are no fruits, so the only time I eat is in the evening when I go home from school. I have to eat very quickly so as to leave home before dark. Sometimes when the situation gets worse, I have to hurry so as to reach the centre before dark. At times I do not wait to eat at home. I do not want to end up like my sister, who was abducted in 1994. I don't think she is alive. We have not heard anything about her from other children who have come back.

We are tired of walking without eating. This war should stop, so we can return to our normal lives.



Child commuters settle down for the night at the St. Joseph's Mission Hospital

***Lilian (12) spends her nights at the Noah's Ark.***

"The rebels first abducted my brother in 1997. He has never come back. We don't know where he is. I don't think he is alive, because I have not heard any reports about him from other children who have come back. This year, one of my elder brothers and two younger sisters were also abducted, on the same night. None of them has returned.

Both my parents have died. I don't remember when they died – I was still very small. My aunt adopted me. I was told rebels came home and murdered them. I am only left with two brothers. We all come to Noah's Ark every evening. In the morning, we leave for school. There is no feeding programme in our school. Even in schools which have feeding programmes, parents still have to pay for the food, salt, onions and firewood.

No, I don't think of the future. I don't think I'll go to secondary school. There is no one to help. All my relatives are very poor now because of this war. They are all scattered in camps. Rebels killed some of them. My aunt is very ill. She can't do anything but cook.

***Albert has 18 children under his care, of which seven are his. They all trek to Gulu town each night.***

My family used to have 1,500 head of cattle. We had tractors and other farm machines. All this was spoiled by the war. Three of my brothers have been killed by rebels. I have been left with their widows and children to look after. We manage only through very hard labour. We have been displaced from our village since 1990, and even here we are not safe. They [LRA] abducted one of my brother's children from this compound. This problem is big and we don't have any hope for the future. We have appealed for the international community to come and help, but we have not seen anything. You know you should live with your children, but the conditions do not allow you to stay with them. Some of them sleep on verandas, some at Noah's Ark.



Some of the mothers go to town with the children. I am always worrying about the children. They are too young to be on their own. There are also a lot of dangers at night. Some have been knocked down by bicycles. Some have been bitten by snakes. The older girls are disturbed by men. Robbers also sometimes attack them.

We see the children again at 7:30 in the morning. They don't get breakfast. Those who are supported with food are in IDP camps.

The women don't rest. They do small businesses. They do all the work, because I am disabled. I cannot walk and my hearing was spoiled when rebels beat me badly in 1989. This problem has caused a lot of disability in our area. But there are no programmes for people with disabilities, so we only depend on the power of God.

***Emanuel, a social worker at the Noah's Ark centre in Gulu.***

We have 1,200 children here, 500 boys and 700 girls. The numbers depend on the security situation. Other children prefer to go to town to sleep on the verandahs, but girls usually prefer to come here for protection.

Our biggest concern is their behaviour. Those who sleep on the verandahs are becoming spoiled. They think there are good things on the street. On the street, they are free to do what they want. They watch videos and all sorts of things which are not good. This means that the number of children on the verandahs is growing every day, because more and more children prefer the free life in town.

They are ruining their future. There has to be a way of getting off the street or there will be no future. Teenage girls often are late. We hear that men usually disturb them. The local government is talking all the time about this problem, but I don't think they are serious. NGOs are taking more responsibility for the children. The parents also are not serious. They are not checking to make sure that their children are where they are supposed to be.



Young child commuter with blanket provided by relief workers

It is their responsibility to find out if the children have reached their sleeping place.

Normally, when they [the children] are here, we teach them good behaviour through the Bible. It is difficult to control the children. Some children fight. Others steal each other's blankets. When it rains, the mats in the tent get wet. I must solve these problems. We try to counsel them and give them the word of God. These children need to be evangelised because they have a lot of problems. They are the target group of the rebels.

A few months ago, the rebels were operating near the town. Some of our children were abducted on their way here. There were about 15 of them. Some of them are still missing. We do not have a feeding programme at this centre, so children have to wait and eat at home. Some of them eat late.

I live just outside Gulu [town]. Last night, rebels abducted some people from my area. I can only trust in God to protect my six children. Some of them sleep here, in this centre. The youngest one remains at home. He is still too young.

Many of these children are orphans. Some of the children here have no clothes. If you visit their homes, you find that there is a big problem. Parents are always thinking of where to get food. There is no way of even getting money to pay fees for their children. In some families, you find that parents are totally traumatised by the war and have become drunkards.



Children arriving in Gulu for the night





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## **UNITED NATIONS OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS (OCHA)**

### **Mission Statement**

“OCHA's mission is to mobilise and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors in order to: alleviate human suffering in disasters and emergencies; advocate for the rights of people in need; promote preparedness and prevention; and facilitate sustainable solutions.”

### **OCHA Regional Support Office for Central and East Africa (OCHA RSO-CEA)**

The OCHA RSO-CEA, based in Nairobi, Kenya, was established in its present form in January 2002, on the foundations of the Regional Office for the Great Lakes (created in 1996 when the first DRC war started). The office now covers 12 countries in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region (i.e. Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Somalia and Sudan).

The OCHA RSO-CEA provides support to the humanitarian coordination activities of OCHA country offices throughout Central and East Africa. It coordinates with the Nairobi-based partners (UN, NGOs, IOs, donors, SRSG for the Great Lakes region) regional humanitarian planning and response to the crises of the CEA region. It also advocates for a concrete and resolute commitment of the International Community to respond to the needs of the affected populations in the region. This latter responsibility is of utmost importance as the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa are, undoubtedly, the most affected regions in the world.

### **Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN)**

Part of OCHA, the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) are specialized information units dedicated to improving the response of the international community to

humanitarian crises. Operating from offices in Nairobi, Abidjan, Johannesburg, Ankara and Islamabad, IRIN draws upon information from a wide variety of sources, including local NGOs and affected communities. This information is sifted, verified and processed into cohesive, accurate and contextual reports on 54 countries, 46 in Sub-Saharan Africa and eight in Central Asia.

IRIN reports are read daily by 125,000 people worldwide who receive them directly via electronic mail services. Reports are also available on IRIN's own website (<http://www.irinnews.org>), and other UN, NGO or commercial websites that repost them. Readers include humanitarian practitioners, donors, government officials, academics, missionaries, diaspora populations, and local and international media.

IRIN's radio service, launched in 2001, reaches communities with limited access to new technology. Over the past two years this service has served some eight million people in Burundi and Somalia. It is currently being extended to millions more in Sudan, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and Afghanistan.

IRIN also manages PlusNews, a comprehensive service for HIV/AIDS information and advocacy in Africa. IRIN is a non-commercial venture and receives its funding from donor governments and institutions.



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